

The Importance of Teaching Tolerance to Touch

During your dog's life he will have to be handled, held even restrained for many reasons, he will have to put up with being grabbed, hugged, patted by various people. As holding and hugging are not natural behaviours for dogs you will need to teach your puppy to happily accept that all this handling is just part of normal everyday life. This is best achieved while he is an impressionable young puppy and it really is worthwhile investing a lot of time to establish this. It is extremely important that your puppy becomes relaxed and comfortable with being touched by you and even unfamiliar people. There will be times when your veterinary surgeon may have to physically examine your pup or he will need to undergo a procedure at the vets. Your vet will greatly appreciate a dog that can be safely handled and the situation will be far less stressful for the dog if he is not anxious about being handled.

Start by gently touching your puppy all over when he is calm, if you do this as you stroke him he will soon learn to trust and enjoy human touch. Practice lots of association of the puppy's happy compliance at being handled paired with food rewards. When the puppy is happy with general touching, gradually increase the time spent on examining each part of his body. Introduce slight restraint of the puppy with a short very gentle hug as you give him a food treat; teach him that this is not a threatening gesture. Quietly speak to him as you reach for his collar touch it, give him a treat, do this several times, when he is ok with this reach for his collar hold it and give it a slight tug as you give him a treat. Go gently to start with, gradually teach the pup not to be intimidated by someone reaching towards his head and neck.

As dogs use their mouth and teeth like we use our hands, they can be prone to injury, also dental disease is a common problem as the dog gets older. It is really important to be able to examine the pup's mouth and teeth. To begin, gently place one hand under the pup's lower jaw with your fingers very gently curled around and just touching the muzzle. With the other hand stroke the pup's head backwards from the nose and gently rest your hand on the pup's head for a few moments as you quietly praise his cooperation, then give him a treat. Do this several times for a few days before actually looking at the teeth or opening his mouth. When the puppy becomes familiar with this and calmly accepts having his face handled this way, place one hand under the lower jaw and with the other hand without covering his nostrils or eyes (this would make him panic) gently raise his lips, occasionally briefly opening his mouth. Great care must be taken not to squeeze or hurt the pup's mouth at any stage.

Dogs can often become anxious about having their paws handled and as most dogs will need their nails clipped at some time, foot handling exercises will accustom the puppy to having a nail trim without aggression or undue anxiety. Pick up the pup's paw and support it in your hand,

with your index finger and thumb gently feel each toe and touch each nail. Give a big treat to the puppy for being good.

Start with just one paw examination at the first session, then gradually progress to include all the paws in different sessions. Be patient and go slowly if necessary and be generous with rewards. The aim is to help the puppy to tolerate and calmly accept having this touch-sensitive area handled. Apart from nail clipping being able to examine your pups paws will come in useful if something is stuck in his pad, or just to check they are in good condition.

Getting the puppy used to having his ears and eyes checked should be done in the same careful manner as medication may need to be administered one day and of course it is important to spot early signs of any problems.

Practice daily home health checks before having a good game with the puppy. Stroke the pup from his head down to the tail, and then run your hand down the whole length of the tail. Gently lift the tail and check the pups behind which should be clean with no redness or swelling around the anus, or matted hair. Run your hands through the pup's fur to check for any unusual lumps or bumps or things stuck in the fur. Check his tummy skin is clear with no spots or scabs. Run your hand down the pup's legs, pick up a foot and examine the pads. It is always handy that you can tell your vet that cut/lump/rash wasn't there yesterday.

Dogs don't always let us know when something is wrong and can be very good at hiding ill health. Handling, grooming and regular health checks spot any potential problems early which may require a veterinary checkup before they have a chance to develop into a more serious issue. As well as handling the puppy watch how he walks, runs, responds when you touch him. Get to know what is normal for your puppy and you will then notice even slight changes in behavior or movement that indicates he may have a problem developing.

As you get your puppy used to being handled, recognise the important signs of a healthy puppy. He should be alert but have a calm demeanor, the skin should be supple, clean with no parasites or dandruff. There should be no discharge from the nose, the eyes should be bright and clear, the ears should be clean with no odour. The teeth should be clean the gums pink (the puppy may have red and swollen gums during teething). The nails should be evenly worn not overgrown or broken. The puppy should move freely with no sign of a limp or stiffness. The abdomen should not be tender or swollen.

During the handling exercises if the puppy starts fussing about, remain calm and neutral slow down and proceed more carefully. Don't let it turn into a game or battle. Take your time to get the puppy to accept being handled with gentle reassurance from you for good behaviour. Never handle the puppy roughly. When your puppy is happy to be handled by you ask other family members or friends to handle the puppy under your supervision, with lots of rewards for the

puppy good behaviour. Handling is an extremely important part of the socialising process but sometimes it is overlooked until it is too late and the dog becomes reactive and unable to be physically examined so any visit to the vet is a traumatic experience for the dog and you! With carefully planned regular handling sessions with your puppy, not only will you spot early signs of any health problems you will be developing good control and relieving anxiety about being touched or restrained building a good relationship between you and your puppy. You should continue regular handling throughout the dog's life to maintain the dogs **Trust in Human Touch.**

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